



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org

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Principal and Vice Chancellor Vicki Nairn
University of Highlands and Islands
Sent by Email: vice-chancellor@uhi.ac.uk

15 January 2025

Dear Principal and Vice Chancellor Nairn,

We are writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) after having read concerning [news reports](#) about the cancellation of a Palestinian academic's talk at the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) in November last year. According to this report, Professor Mazin Qumsiyeh, a distinguished Palestinian environmentalist, had a scheduled lecture cancelled at very short notice. This action raises serious questions about the university's commitment to academic freedom, intellectual exchange, and respect for scholarly contributions.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

Professor Qumsiyeh is an internationally respected biologist, environmentalist, and human rights advocate. As founder and director of the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability and the Palestine Museum of Natural History at Bethlehem University, he has made significant contributions to the fields of biodiversity conservation, sustainability, and environmental justice. His work includes the formulation of the Palestinian National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, a critical framework for addressing environmental challenges under extraordinary conditions of occupation and ecological degradation. He is a laureate of the Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation and has served on the faculties of Yale University and other prestigious institutions.

The decision to cancel Professor Qumsiyeh's lecture, reportedly communicated through a single-line email without explanation, is particularly troubling given the broader context of his visit. Scheduled to discuss "Sustainability and Biodiversity Preservation in Developing Countries," Professor Qumsiyeh's lecture was poised to offer valuable insights drawn from his decades of academic and practical experience. His work bridges pressing global issues, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and the intersection of environmental and social justice—issues of paramount importance to academic communities and the public alike.

Moreover, this is reportedly not the first time that UHI has cancelled an event linked to Palestine, following a similar cancellation of an exhibition by Palestinian artist Feda'a Al-Hassanet. Such patterns risk creating the perception of institutional bias and a disregard for the principles of inclusivity and academic freedom.

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Under the terms of the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016, universities in Scotland have a legal obligation to uphold academic freedom. This principle is essential to fostering a culture of open inquiry and robust debate, enabling scholars to explore challenging and diverse perspectives without fear of censorship or reprisal. By cancelling Professor Qumsiyeh's lecture without clear justification, UHI risks failing to meet its statutory obligations, as well as undermining public confidence in its commitment to these core values.

Academic institutions serve as vital platforms for dialogue, debate, and the free exchange of ideas. By cancelling this lecture, UHI has not only deprived its community of the opportunity to engage with a distinguished scholar but also sent a concerning message about the value it places on diverse perspectives, particularly those from underrepresented and marginalized communities.

We urge UHI to take steps to reaffirm its commitment to academic freedom and the open exchange of ideas. Specifically, we call on the university to do the following:

- Reinstatement of the Lecture:** Immediate rescheduling of Professor Qumsiyeh's lecture, ensuring that he has the platform to share his valuable insights with the university community.
- Institutional Review:** A transparent review of UHI's policies regarding event hosting to ensure alignment with principles of academic freedom and inclusivity.
- Engagement and Accountability:** Open dialogue with affected parties, including Professor Qumsiyeh and the wider academic and public community, to address concerns and rebuild trust.

As a scholarly association committed to the study of the Middle East and North Africa, BRISMES strongly believes that the free exchange of ideas is foundational to academic inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge. We call on UHI to demonstrate leadership in upholding these principles, ensuring that such regrettable incidents do not recur.

In order to give you a right to respond, we will not publish this letter on our website until after 14 February 2025. We look forward to your response and are available to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES)

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit:

[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)

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